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SUBJECT: NIGER: ISLAM ANALYSIS

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Classified By: Ambassador B M Allen, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Building on the excellent study of Islamic practices in Niger that the Danish Cooperation (Danida) commissioned this year, excerpts from Islamic press organs such as the monthly newspaper As-Salam and radio Bonferey and discussions with Nigeriens of various backgrounds and degrees of religiosity, it is possible to extrapolate current and future trends of Islam in Niger. On the one hand, the growing influence of conservative preachers from the south and radical influences from the north have a potentially explosive effect when combined with unemployed, disaffected youth whose prospects seem equally dim whether they are illiterate or have finished university. Increased humanitarian and development assistance from Islamic organizations and countries such as Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan will be equally influential. This will be reinforced to the extent that these donations are given to local reformist or radical Islamic organizations, who will then carry out development projects with a strong proselytizing message. At the same time, the ongoing problems in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East, combined with negative reactions to the Danish cartoons and to growing anti-immigration sentiments in Europe, create an increasing distrust of the US and the West.

12. (C) The GON continues to emphasize that Niger is a secular democracy, and many local Islamic organizations are increasingly discussing and promoting human rights and a culture of peace and tolerance. US humanitarian and development assistance and transformational and public diplomacy are having a positive effect, but the US will have to do more to compete with the outside influences and perceived stagnating local development. Quickly establishing the development component of the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) must remain a top USG priority. Judicious use of ESF, DHRF and anti-Trafficking funds, as well as increased participation in International Visitor Programs (IVs) helped us reach key vulnerable groups in Niger. Our reach can be further extended by setting up the American Corners requested for the southern border cities of Diffa and Maradi. In the longer term, re-establishing a permanent USAID presence and increasing public diplomacy efforts that reinforce the message of US support for

democracy, development and humanitarian assistance are necessary steps to counter negative perceptions of US foreign policy vis a vis the Middle East and Islam in general. End Summary.

¶3. (U) There are contradictory ideas of Islam and Islamic practices circulating in Niger. Conservative imams and preachers from the Wahabi "Izalay" movement regularly cross the borders from Nigeria to fund and spread Niger's southern cousins' harsh views of sharia and communitarian politics. In some cases, these messages resonate with local culture and traditional animistic practices, resulting in a rise in the practice of cloistering women - ironically forcing men to assume many traditionally female tasks outside the home, such as fetching water. Many practitioners are also discouraging formal education, particularly for girls. The political ideas find fertile ground in the unemployed and disaffected youth of these regions, which many experts see as a potential powder keg.

¶4. (C) The northern part of Niger, particularly the region abutting Algeria and Mali, is susceptible to radically politicized Islamic messages spread by Algerian Salafists, and to a much lesser extent, Islamicized Tuaregs militant (most Tuareg activists thus far are secular nationalists). Izalay funds are paying for the construction of a large new mosque and social service center in Agadez city, and Saudi and other Gulf countries have provided funds to build smaller mosques in villages in northwestern Niger and elsewhere. Local cynicism about the GON and a love-hate relationship with the Western tourists who are the region's main source of revenue combine with these messages to create the most cynical perspective on US motives in any region of Niger (reftel A). This area, too, suffers from severe unemployment and poor prospects for youth. Those who do not slip across the porous borders to Algeria and Libya are torn between wanting to maintain the current peace and a desire to shake things up, for good or ill. The potential spread of Tuareg militancy from neighboring Mali in the wake of the May 2006 attacks on Kidal and Menaka clearly worries both GON and Tuareg community leaders.

¶5. (U) In the areas bordering Nigeria and elsewhere throughout the country, many imams and Islamic associations are working with a variety of partners - other NGOs, the GON,

and international donors - to promote education, AIDS awareness, polio and other vaccinations, tolerance, and human rights. There has been a steady rise in the number of seminars and workshops discussing Islam and human rights, some inspired and/or sponsored by the American Cultural Center, and others completely independent. Here, too, there is a broad spectrum of opinions that sometimes finds some strange bedfellows working together. In Niger, discerning the differences between "traditional" (African syncretic) Islam and self-described "modern" Wahabi strains introduced from outside influences can be extremely tricky.

¶6. (U) Some "traditional" scholars point to several Islamic declarations of human rights, such as that adopted in Cairo during the 1990s, which states that all human beings are created equal, regardless of grade, religion, or ethnic origin. Reformist, izalay, preachers are sometimes more willing to acknowledge women's property rights than many supposedly more moderate imams, who are more influenced by local traditions. A supposedly progressive Muslim Nigerien philosophy professor with a traditionalist bent created a backlash from all sides when he said that Islam had historically tolerated such injustices as slavery and other human rights violations: even those who might not have acknowledged the violations were adamant that Islam does not tolerate injustice. Traditionalists and Izalays alike universally condemned the Danish cartoons in Niger, and they equally oppose US/Western foreign policy in the Middle East. However, to date there has been an equally united call for non-violent measures to refute them and a repudiation of those who choose violence in contradiction of Islam's

peaceful nature (what limited support for violence that exists in Niger political culture tends to arise from fringe elements of leftist student movements). The tensions and contradictions in current Nigerien Muslim thinking are evident in a newspaper such as As-Salam, whose latest edition carried extremely sophisticated analyses of the "clash of civilizations" between East and West - and an article about djinns (evil spirits) appearing in Diffa, due to the indecent attire of some of the local young girls.

¶17. (U) Views on the status of women are mixed. Some women's organizations are working for complete equality, parallel to that of their sisters in the West. Others promote better health and education for women and children in a more traditional framework. The GON publicly supported the ratification of the Additional Protocol to the African Human and People's Rights Charter relating to Women's Rights in Africa, but the was defeated (reftel B). This position prevailed in spite of the GON's argument that allowing early marriage and some of the problems that result is really a violation of the principles of Islam.

¶18. (U) One trend that is consistent throughout Niger is the rise in the number of Koranic schools, or madrassas, in part due to the lack of other educational facilities in some areas. Even here, though, there is a wide range of sizes and shapes. Some are run by highly educated intellectuals who speak and read fluent Arabic, French, and other local languages. Some are run by itinerant preachers who are virtually illiterate themselves. Some schools restrict admission to boys and men, but many are opening their doors to girls and women as well - in some cases, in order to preach repressive messages. The most deleterious of these are the full-time madrassas that provide no education other than a poor ability to parrot passages from the Koran in pigeon Arabic: the children in these schools grow up completely illiterate, with no training in math or basic science. Both the GON and civil society are working to encourage such schools either to function only during evenings and week-ends so as to allow the children to attend public school, or to incorporate more formal educational elements into their own curricula. Still others would like the GON to allow religion and morals to be taught in the public schools, both to coopt madrassas and prevent perceived decadence from seeping into society.

¶19. (U) As noted above, many Islamic organizations are beginning to include messages about development and democracy in their preaching. Islamic groups, including American PVO's, were key partners who responded to the severe food crisis that struck Niger in 2005. Many of the groups have remained and are even beginning to move into more active development work, such as building wells and food banks. Funding for such activities usually comes from outside sources. The US, European donors, and the UN support the spread of democratic messages in an Islamic context as promoted by religious leaders, but they fund more concrete projects either in direct partnership with the GON or via secular organizations or faith-based PVO's which do not proselytize. Increasingly Middle Eastern, Maghrebian, and

some Asian donors are the main sources of funding for the building projects. This is encouraged, and, indeed, promoted by the GON.

¶10. (C) The GON insists that the country is a secular, pluralistic democracy, but has shown inability to set up a family code or enforce even sharia practices that provide women with inheritance and other rights. This demonstrates fear of traditional religious leaders and an unwillingness to take a firm stand for the equality promised in the constitution. One example is the failed vote on marriage age (Reftel B). Another example is the GON's concession to the GON-appointed Islamic Council not to permit the publication of the Danish study, because some members of the Council claimed the unscientific nature of the study and its conclusions about Islamic practices would cause ruptures

among religious leaders, although it has been hard to obtain specific information about exactly what was problematic.

¶11. (U) Comment: Niger is at something of a religious and societal crossroads. A history of Islamicization dating back to the seventh century is nevertheless mixed with equally ancient animist and other traditional practices that shape the local face of Islam in Niger. Progressive "traditional" Muslims advocating women's rights and other departures from local tradition are sometimes aided by "modern" Izalays who preach a return to a purer form of Islam, while others turn to more repressive interpretations and more political messages. Despite differing opinions and practices, most Islamic leaders would be glad to work with the US to further development and education, but they are also open to influence by other outside donors. It is crucial for the US to continue to work on food security, health, and other development areas, as well as to increase its transformational and public diplomacy efforts via new American Corners, increased IVs for Muslim leaders, and other ongoing programs. ESF funds for our Ref A proposal to work with Moroccans to provide the GON with guidance about setting up a family code that protects women and children will help us avoid a backlash from the religious community. However, perhaps a secular contact of the Embassy, summed it up when he said, "Niger's youth will follow whoever provides them with health, education and jobs." Winning the hearts and minds of the people and, thus, the Global War on Terror, in Niger, may well come down to who is seen to care most for the welfare of the people. End Comment.

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